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# **The Unseamed Picture: Conflicting Narratives of Women in the Modern European Past**

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There is a need to recognise the heterogeneity of expressions of women's historical trajectories...in a way that does not subordinate this task to the categories of mainstream history – whether this means national histories or even women's history itself.<sup>1</sup>

The gender history of the future is one that can confidently admit the possibility of disparate temporalities. Rather than attempting to fit gender back into established chronologies and categories, its more productive outcome may be to allow dissonance within grand narratives.<sup>2</sup>

This article arises from a personal journey through writing the history of women and gender in modern Europe. Other historians of Europe will no doubt recognise my experience of being pulled in different directions, between the general and the particular, the overarching interpretation and the closely researched case study, because it is part and parcel of being a 'Europeanist' – someone with expertise in one part of the continent who is then almost honour-bound to be able to write about Europe as a whole, a task becoming increasingly difficult, maybe impossible, in view of the changing boundaries of Europe in modern geopolitics.<sup>3</sup> Many historians of women in Europe have risen to the challenge, inspired by the feminist aim of producing alternative narratives of the past to those privileged in mainstream histories, and informed by the belief that, despite their differences, women in Western Europe at least, had more in common than the experiences that divided them.<sup>4</sup> The result has been a series of histories of European

women from medieval times to the present which offer both totalising or overarching interpretations and some real challenges to generalist histories of Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Both of these legitimating claims may still be heard but are increasingly subject to debate. The recognition amongst historians of women of the salience of other social categories such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality and generation as well as class has unsettled narratives which privilege sex and has forced us to find ways of telling a coherent story that nevertheless encompasses heterogeneity.<sup>6</sup> As Kathleen Canning notes, in view of the 'extraordinary scholarly achievements' in the fields of women and gender history over thirty years or so, and its ability to create new fields and rupture old ones, gender history must have the confidence to create its own narratives which may sit alongside, challenge or be incorporated in the overarching interpretations.<sup>7</sup> The alternative would merely be more synthesis and homogenisation and consequently the blunting of the critical edge of feminist writing about the European past.

The thoughts expressed here on the writing of European women's and gender history arise from a personal conflict experienced in the process of researching and writing two books concurrently. As I synthesised and narrated the story of women in nineteenth-century Europe for an overarching survey text, at the same time I was conducting archival and oral history research in the most northerly islands of the British Isles for an explicitly local and embedded history of women and gender in Shetland.<sup>8</sup> Writing the Shetland book unsettled my comfort zone with regard to the grander narratives and chronologies of change I had absorbed, presented and bolstered in my survey of European women. What is at stake here is not merely the tension between the scholarly exercise of close analysis and conceptual sophistication for the monograph study and the need to present a more general and accessible narrative for wider consumption. It is also about the kinds of stories we write, the research experiences we have, and the sense in which our mental map of the past is a crude tool for the charting of experience at the local and personal level. How can we write meaningful and recognisable histories which also contribute to the (re-)writing of the bigger picture? And

what happens when the stories told about the local and the personal jar with the overarching frameworks?

I shall argue that the dissonance that exists between local or particular women's histories and general interpretations should be taken seriously; that is, the particular study that does not chime with the general framework should not be placed on the margins and regarded as peripheral to the core story. Rather, there are lessons to be learned from historical narratives generated by women's experience embedded within the local context. Indeed, such histories born of the attempt to access women's voices and subjectivities may offer different narratives and chronologies of change, driven by female-centred sources and feminist research strategies. This article makes three key points. First, the analysis of a place like Shetland which appears different or unusual offers the historian a unique vantage point from which to form a new perspective on the general or familiar landscape of European women's history. Second, the deliberate prioritising of women's voices and interpretations in the local context provides a version of women's pasts which may jar with more familiar narratives of continuity and change. And third, this combination of strangeness and subjectivity offers the historian an authentic story with meaning for those who narrated it.

### **Seamless narratives, ragged edges**

In the space of little more than three decades, women's and gender historians have produced an expansive corpus of work that has succeeded in creating a series of gendered narratives of the European past.<sup>9</sup> The story of Europe from medieval times to the present has been told from the perspective of women's experience and has been problematised using theories of gender. Yet it is precisely because of the breadth and depth of research – especially in the modern period – that any one overarching narrative is now unsustainable. Interpretations that work for national contexts seem inappropriate when applied more widely; urban-based narratives sit uncomfortably next to those emanating from places slower to industrialise and so on. The result then is a series of interpretive frameworks for telling the story of European women which broadly run in parallel yet

reflect national historiographical trajectories and material variations in different territories.

From the British perspective the dominant framing paradigm in analyses of the period from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth century has been that of ‘separate spheres’. The ideology that women and men were naturally predisposed to inhabit separate realms of life – the public and the private – which reached its zenith in the first half of the nineteenth century, has been a particularly powerful explanatory framework for understanding the gendered inequalities of industrialising Britain. It is, of course, a gross simplification, even a parody of a complex and nuanced story and it has rightly been subject to sustained criticism.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the separate spheres narrative retains a presence in accounts of modern British women and gender relations as a prescriptive discourse (though one with many competing strands) rather than a descriptive model. It is generally recognised that, notwithstanding the existence of ideological or discursive formulations that deployed separate spheres as organising concepts, public and private realms were in fact porous, the implementation and impact of discursive constructions was varied, and women (and men) contested gendered constructions in their everyday lives as well as in public and organised challenges to prescriptive norms.<sup>11</sup> So-called ‘revisionist’ approaches have sought to understand women’s own motivations and subjectivities and have suggested that discourses that affirmed women’s relationship to the home were ‘wholly against the grain of women’s experiences.’<sup>12</sup>

Separate spheres is just one of the organising frameworks that have helped to shape analyses of European women’s history, though perhaps it has had particular resonance for British-based historians where a historiographical debate on periodisation has focused on this interpretive model. It is certainly incumbent on most historians of women in modern Britain to at least engage with the concept of separate spheres even if they go on to reject it, not least because it has found its way into popular and mainstream accounts of British history and therefore exists within current discourse which in turn informs women’s own interpretations of their pasts.<sup>13</sup> But in Britain and elsewhere the chronological boundaries which separate spheres helped to create have been undermined

so that narratives of continuity and change are now much more temporally fluid. Beyond Britain, the public and private framework has been less frequently deployed, notably in those places where the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation were slower and where other discourses (such as the implication of maternalism in nation-state formation) have greater relevance.<sup>14</sup>

Those historians who research parts of Europe outside the modern, industrialised states have expressed unease with the continued importance assigned to organising concepts based upon ‘modernisation’. In 1999 Mary Nash, from the perspective of Spanish women’s history, remarked that ‘A fully comprehensive view of European women’s history has yet to be established ... Meta-narratives identified as being representative of European women’s history, but based on a selective reading of British or French studies, are still accepted as ... a “European” discourse’.<sup>15</sup> One of the consequences of a metanarrative of modern European women’s history has been a flattening or smoothing out of the complex chronologies of women’s historical trajectories and experiences. Clearly, metanarratives marginalise or ignore regional and cultural difference within countries and they have a tendency to focus on those countries where change was most advanced. Thus the industrialising states of northern Europe are adopted as the blueprint for the others. The narratives of women in smaller states are subsumed into the histories of their larger neighbours and the places which seemingly lag behind economically are tacked on as interesting sideshows. Many of us would agree with Liz Stanley’s view that ‘rather than seeing a feminist history as the recovery of all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, such that we finally gain a single, complete and unseamed picture of the whole ... there is no “whole” to piece together, but rather contiguous though clashing, and certainly not seamlessly meshing, competing histories’.<sup>16</sup> Competing and clashing histories are perhaps the future, especially in the light of the development of women’s history in central and Eastern Europe and the rather strained attempt to include these stories in existing interpretations as well as the incorporation of global and postcolonial perspectives. We need to think about how to juxtapose different narratives derived from different contexts in order to do justice to the variety of experiences we uncover.

The conceptual opportunity offered by the use of gender as a tool of analysis has widened the frame of reference and permitted a reconfiguration of the telling of European history. Whereas a determinist deployment of separate spheres for instance, produced constraints in terms of periodisation, gender transcends traditional chronological and conceptual boundaries and has encouraged new thinking on themes such as politics and citizenship, sexuality, motherhood and the demographic transition, thus facilitating new narrative threads which may create bridges between apparently divergent experiences.<sup>17</sup>

As I sat in the most northerly archive in the British Isles these issues of competing narratives and of overarching frameworks came sharply into view. I had absorbed a generation of writing about modern European women which used a series of large interpretive frames to shape the story: modernisation, emancipation, democratisation and in Britain more especially, 'separate spheres'. My feet were planted in modernising, industrialising Europe (probably somewhere in northern Germany), my perspective was metropolitan, and I had been trained in the traditional ways of the historian's craft to privilege research in the archives. But the experience of researching the story of women in Shetland disturbed my comfort zone. It just did not fit with the big interpretations. The stories that emanated from this place suggested new or at least different chronologies. The outcome was that I had to jettison the old tropes. The history I wrote of women in this northern archipelago marked a shift in my thinking about how we might write the history of European women, at least in the recent past. The shift encompasses two main issues: methodological, or the way we practice our historical research, and one of perspective and scale, or how we transcend particularity while providing texture and authenticity to the general narrative. If our aim is to write usable and recognisable histories of women and gender relations in the past, it is incumbent upon us to try to identify interpretive threads which span national, local and temporal differences.

### **Issues of historical practice**

The way we practice our historical research and writing affects the kind of history we produce. One's experience in the archive and in the field should not be downplayed since

interactions with our sources – both printed and otherwise – create the environment from which we craft our stories. Living and working in a small and relatively remote place like Shetland, a collection of islands some 120 miles from the British mainland, brings the researcher face to face with her research subjects and one begins to traverse the line between historian and anthropologist. It should be said at the outset though, that a peripheral island community like Shetland is not especially representative or typical; indeed it was exceptional in many ways and thus may appear to be an odd choice of launch pad for a rethinking of the bigger picture. Yet just as anthropologists sought out the strange to cast new perspectives on the familiar, my experience in Shetland forced me to view the traditional periodisation and explanatory frameworks through new spectacles. At the same time, Shetland was not a timeless, rural backwater, cut off from the larger forces of change. It was not a place where history stood still. As a predominantly fishing and farming community at the crossroads of northern European trade routes and characterised in the nineteenth century by high levels of migration, its inhabitants were affected by wider economic and cultural trends. The challenge for the historian of women is to integrate analysis of material conditions with women's subjectivities. My experience in attempting to do just this is my starting point.

Shetland in the twenty-first century is a place which has a keen and living sense of its past; where people harbour stories and want to tell them; where the past is very much a part of everyday life in all sorts of ways – from the remnants of ruined croft buildings that litter the landscape to the vibrancy of the Shetland dialect and the continued symbolic importance of material referents of the past: hand-knitting, peat-cutting and fishing to name a few.<sup>18</sup> The past is in the present in Shetland and women are at the heart of Shetlanders' own story or understanding of their past. In fact the story of women in the past has come to dominate the way Shetlanders today – men and women – imagine and recount their history. Here is a place then where women's story is Shetland's history.

For the historian, being immersed in a society with a keen sense of how to tell the story of its past is a novel and exciting experience with concrete implications. To begin



with, the archive was a repository of women's stories. The archival holdings of conventional printed sources such as legal records, poor law cases, kirk session minutes and employment records, are exceptionally full in Shetland, offering untold opportunities to unearth rich evidence of women's lives.<sup>19</sup> In addition, local family historians had transcribed reams of census data permitting the reconstruction of families and households over time. A huge collection of oral histories facilitated access to evidence of women's experience in a different form. And as well as this source material, the archive itself attracted stories as an acknowledged repository for the past and an active facilitator of historical investigation. Visitors to the archives from the islands but also from the Scottish mainland and overseas, brought stories with them to share. Women and men transformed the search room into a living archive, telling stories of their mothers and grandmothers, recognising names in the printed record and suggesting people to speak to – thus facilitating a dialogue between the official sources and the present. I had not counted on this interplay between the past and the present through the prism of women. I could not have imagined the tremendous power of narratives of the past in Shetland which used women and women's position in the economy and culture as the leitmotif for historical change. Undoubtedly this interactive research experience influenced the kind of history that was eventually written. It was impossible to remain objective or distanced from the stories being told and neither was it desirable to impose on the sources a framework imported from other contexts. It soon became clear that narratives of continuity and change derived from other places were not part of the lexicon of the Shetland story.

The conversation between past and present has been extensively theorised by historians utilising oral sources. Those practicing oral history are now fully aware of the implications of intersubjectivity, the relationship between individual and collective memory and the existence of what is termed the 'cultural circuit' or feedback loop between personal testimonies and external discourses.<sup>20</sup> Oral historians understand that memory narratives are produced within a discursive context and that the story eventually crafted by the historian cannot be free from the environment in which it was created. Recent interventions in this debate have urged that the subjective and the personal be put

back into the story, arguing that subjectivity should not be reduced to a mere product of external discourses.<sup>21</sup> In the context of Shetland these methodological insights are certainly relevant to the analysis of oral history and storytelling but also they may be transferred to the research process more generally.

The interplay between past and present can be explained as follows. From the seventeenth century, Shetland was at the crossroads of fish trading routes, a transit stop for merchants, fishermen, smugglers and whalers. But it was also a relatively isolated island community dominated by farming and fishing. From the early nineteenth century, when Shetland began to be visited by writers, a female-centred narrative of Shetland's past began to be formulated. Visitors to the islands from mainland Britain invariably commented upon the centrality of women to the life of the islands. They were shocked by the public visibility of women – working in the fields, gathering peats from the hill, engaging in trade and commerce as independent actors, free from male supervision. Women's ubiquity was not surprising for females vastly outnumbered males in these islands – in 1861 when the population of the islands numbered almost 32,000, the ratio of women to men was 143:100. Women were thus commonly engaged in outdoor work in a place where crofting, fishing and hand-knitting were the prime economic activities. By the 1880s though, it was the condition, rather than the mere presence, of women that became a benchmark for highlighting the 'backwardness' of Shetland in comparison with the British mainland. The fact of females undertaking hard, physical labour outdoors was seen by visitors as a sign of an unmodernised society and moreover a society which appeared to have no truck with the ideology of domesticity and of separate spheres. Sir Walter Scott, alighting on Shetland in 1903, 'greatly deprecated the invincible native habit of making the women burden-bearers.'<sup>22</sup> So the focus on women by visitors was a means of signifying difference.

From the early nineteenth century islanders themselves – women and men – also used the figure of the woman to speak about their history and culture, but in a positive way that emphasised women's agency. Popular nineteenth-century interpretations of the thirteenth-century Norse sagas, reprinted and referred to in the Shetland press and in

fiction, featured strong and powerful women. Popular Shetland writers too used the leitmotif of the strong, independent Shetland woman to convey a sense of place and an understanding of the past. Thus a discourse was circulated in oral and written sources of women at the heart of Shetland society. More than that, women were represented as capable of sound management and decision making, hence legitimising a state of affairs in which they were in charge of the household and ‘quite able to do the work of men’. Popular fiction and journalistic feature writing also valorised women in their role as workers, independent of men if need be and in some cases heroic, coming to the rescue of men (in sea rescues for instance).<sup>23</sup> And finally, folk tales and family stories too draw upon these ‘myths’ of Shetland womanhood.

Now one might say that this kind of representation created a caricature of Shetland womanhood that combined a romantic heroism with tragedy and resilience. But these representations would not have had such purchase and longevity if they were not at least partly grounded in material experience, and if they were not recognised as such. For instance, the fictional stories told by Jessie Saxby, Shetland’s most successful writer, drew upon the women’s lives she observed in her native islands, in some cases barely concealing real events and people. The film made by Jenny Brown in 1934, *The Rugged Island*, depicts the everyday lives of members of a typical Shetland crafting-fishing family centring on the loves and losses of the women. And the writings of Christina Jamieson, Shetland’s foremost campaigner for women’s rights, focused on the particular material poverty of women in her native Shetland.<sup>24</sup> All of these were (and still are) influential in helping present-day Shetlanders construct their identity and present themselves to others. So when we turn to oral history as well as other present-day ways of representing and telling the past (museum exhibits, photographs, popular histories, community heritage presentations) we find that Shetlanders shape their stories around these public representations of history and culture. Hence the figure of ‘the Shetland woman’ is universally recognised in the islands as being at the heart of the community and is given greater prominence than the absent fisherman or the more contemporary oil worker.

The way in which Shetlanders use this island history was most obvious in the 1970s and 80s when Shetland was experiencing major economic and cultural change following the discovery of North Sea oil and the development of the oil terminal on the islands. The influx of workers to the oil and subsidiary industries from all over the United Kingdom and the growth in economic opportunities for islanders (especially women) prompted Shetlanders to emphasise their difference from the newcomers in terms of a widely accepted discourse: the gender equality they perceived to be a feature of island life, both in the past and the present.<sup>25</sup> At one public meeting to discuss gender roles in the late 1970s it was said that ‘Shetland society, ancient and modern, had been characterised by egalitarian sex roles, whereas Scottish society was rampant with sexism’.<sup>26</sup> This utterance revealed more than just some Shetlanders’ sense that they enjoyed a tradition of gender equality. It also revealed a consciousness of the frameworks used to structure interpretations of gender relations elsewhere. Shetlanders consciously based their story in opposition to what they perceive as the dominant narrative beyond Shetland.

Since the 1970s the centrality of women to Shetland’s story of its past has remained strong. A good example of the way in which women’s economic and cultural place in the community continues to be celebrated is the use of hand-knitting as a symbol of identity. The story of women’s economic role in the Shetland hosiery production sector is well-known and embedded within almost every family in the islands. Throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, knitting was the mainstay of many families, providing a meagre but reliable living and contributing to the ability of many unmarried and widowed females to survive. In recent years the image of the female knitter has experienced a revival as traditional home production has been transformed into a revered art form. This transformation is exemplified by the work of the Shetland textile development officer whose research into the forgotten stories of innovative and entrepreneurial women hand-knitters in the inter-war years, coupled with the support for present day textile artists in the interpretation of the work of these women, demonstrates that the process of telling the story of the past through the prism

of women is not static but a fluid and creative process, reflecting changes in Shetland society.<sup>27</sup>

By the 1980s, the story of Shetland as a woman's place was well established. It was clear in oral testimony of those interviewed in the 1970s and 1980s that they had incorporated the discourse into their narratives of the past. I found this through using an existing oral history archive containing interviews with women and men, supplemented by a small number of face-to-face interviews with women who had been identified to me as repositories of knowledge about Shetland women in the past. In a series of unstructured interviews I found the discourse of dominant Shetland womanhood was central to the ways in which respondents narrated their histories. Indeed, the texture of the oral histories was multi-layered, drawing upon autobiography, local history, popular discourses, official sources and material referents, but common to all was the sense that women's stories, experiences and consciousness were central to an understanding of the history of this place. The narrative of Shetland was woman-centred albeit usually nestled within a broader more conventional socio-economic context. Unsurprisingly female respondents placed women at the heart of their narratives, telling rich and detailed stories of mothers, grandmothers and aunts but men too had incorporated the notion of Shetland as a female-dominated place into their memories, while acknowledging the existence of an alternative gender model. In the words of one male respondent, 'The women were in among things. That was the unusual thing. They bwirna [weren't] supposed to be'.<sup>28</sup>

My research was not conceived primarily as an oral history project; indeed I had started out with the aim of conducting archive-based analysis of mainly written sources. But a chance discovery of a particularly revelatory oral history interview conducted in 1982 had the effect of shifting the emphasis of the entire project. I wanted to privilege women's words and women's interpretations and versions of the Shetland past. This single interview featured the Shetland crofter, knitter and storyteller Mary Manson – who was then aged 85 and a typical Shetland woman in many ways – whose stories conjured up an intangible past barely reachable in the printed sources.<sup>29</sup> Rather than merely using her testimony to illustrate a world the historian has already constructed from traditional

sources, I took her narrative as a starting point, an entrée to a different interpretive world of popular belief, of community and of ritual grounded in the material circumstances of women's day to day life. In short, the analysis of this particular narrative aided the historian's desire to 'imagine oneself into the past', to produce a version of the past embedded in women's words and experience.<sup>30</sup>

Mary Manson told stories about Shetland which were drawn from her and her family's everyday experience. One story related in great detail and uninterrupted is a women-centred tale about a journey undertaken by her mother and a female cousin when, as young teenagers, they travelled across two islands in search of a wise-woman who could provide medicine for a sick relative. The journey is told as a perilous venture into the unknown, guided by hospitable strangers who provide food, directions and ferry crossings. When they finally reach the wise-woman's house, they enter deep into what sounds to the listener like a gothic fairytale as they are locked up in a dark box-bed whilst a potion is made over a fire. Mary described the girls' experience in great detail:

she says you'll geng tae bed and lay you doon, I'll pit you tae bed afore I go, and the bed at she had was a boxed bed, it was a boxed bed ootbye at the partition, and this door drew close, a wooden door at drew close in the bed, I mind Mammy saying it was a fine bed at she had, she had a tattered rug and a feather bed and of course, then a days it was likely supposed tae be a wonderful bed, onywey they got aff o dem and they got intae this bed and she drew the door across the front. So you can keen what they were likely tinkin', locked in a dis black prison, didna know what was going to happen after that, so anyway, she left them in yunder and she guid out, and she was a braw while away, and at last they heard her comin in, but it had tae be kinda light, at had tae be the spring do sees at she could see, anywey, daylight coming up or something, but they heard her coming in and they heard her starting to get the fire up, it was a fire in the middle of the floor and they heard her gettin doon the peats and gettin this fire going, and a pouring a water and a rattling of pans and tins and all this, and then after a while they fan the smell o' lik dis roots, lik a strong smell of roots boiling, so Mammy said they

could lie no longer for they were never fallen asleep, she got up and she tried, there was a chink in the door, and she got up and she tried tae peep and see what was going on and she said that the old wife was sitting ower the heartstane wi' all this pots and pans and a great pot hanging in the crook, boiling with this mixture. So eh, onyway she said she raise up, Mam would swear at she never made ony noise at all tae peep oot this chink and of course this old wife was sittin wi' her back til her and she never kent til she let oot a shout, lie doon an faa asleep this minute, she says, I keen ower weel at you're watching me, you're going tae deystroy the medicine.<sup>31</sup>

Fearful and powerless, the girls seem to become heroines in an 'other world' of magical powers, communal values and female agency.

I realised there was the potential for a deeper, or at least a richer, understanding of the place of women in Shetland society focusing not upon the content of this story but on Mary Manson's telling of the narrative. It is a story told by a woman who sees herself as a keeper of memory and a transmitter of knowledge (perhaps especially 'female knowledge'). Mary Manson is empowered both by the process of telling the story and in demonstrating her possession of knowledges that the listeners lack. She might be described as a 'memorial guardian'.<sup>32</sup> The narrative is not merely a tale of the imagination but a story crafted from autobiographical memory and the cultural past. Her tales (and those of other female interviewees I spoke to) are distinguished by the use of domestic detail or context, their groundedness in the specificity of the everyday life of Shetland, and by their use as narratives of cultural survival. Mary Manson's narrative invokes, on the surface at least, a very different world from the one in which she (and her listeners) were materially situated in 1982. Her story is not primarily a tale of the imagination, but a conjuring up of a lost world brought to life and made 'authentic' by the use of dialogue and local detail. For the historian this narrative offers an access point to social memory and cultural experience via a legitimate expression of a female culture. However, the telling of the story also had a purpose – to mark the passing of a culture and way of life in the islands. Mary Manson told her story, in part to highlight how medical

provision had changed, reflecting on the differences characterising the period in which the story is set (the late nineteenth century) and the 1980s:

Weel, I canna mind when it would have been, but onywye I should think the difference noo, although we are never thankful enough, two nurses and two Doctors here in Yell, and you just need tae feel a pain or anything, lift the phone and call the Doctor and he's here afore you get the phone laid doon, at the door tae see what's wrong wi' you, and then tae think about the old folk, what a life they had if anything was the matter with them, aha. But that was my midder [mother] when she was a young lass, she couldna have been very old she only had tae be in her teens maybe 14 or 15, but this cousin of theirs took ill...<sup>33</sup>

So what she was doing was using stories of heroic women in her family to narrate the historical character of Shetland culture, and through that record the dramatic course of change. Mary Manson's stories then help the historian to bridge the gap between generalised representations of the past and subjective memory narratives which are locally generated.

Women's oral and written narratives possess three functions in this context: the transmission of social memory, the maintenance and reification of a myth of Shetland womanhood and the validation of women's place in Shetland history (and thus, by extension, their place in the present). Another oral testimony, that of Mary Ellen Odie, a lifelong Shetland resident, active local historian and recognised enthusiast for women's history, typifies a slightly different approach to the transmission of social memory.<sup>34</sup> Mary Ellen's stories, told to me in 2001, were about a past which she 'knows' through her life on the island of Yell and her immersion in the history of the island. What is notable about Mary Ellen's narrative is her ability to weave together personal memories and family stories with the documented past clearly illustrated in this conversation about the 'hungry gap' – the period of time after the previous year's grain ran out and before the new grain was harvested.



But that hungry gap must have been such a frightener. And one thing in relation to women that I certainly know affected the people in North Yell particularly we have Palmers Evans' [local doctor] very poignant note at the end of the list of names of people, was the potato famine it happened just the second year after the Irish, and North Yell got a really bad blight. It was then that the ... meal roads of North Yell were introduced seriously after that year. But then the meal roads had to be introduced just before when the hungry gap had really widened in the late 30s, that was a bad bad time. It comes out, I tell you where it comes out quite graphically is in the Napier Commission [1883 Royal Commission on crofting] where people describe what it was like to be, to have your last meal and then know that after that it was just the bare essentials. My great granny knew how to cook a starling, do you believe that? ... Her man was drowned and she was really left destitute, 1851. And they caught starlings in a gun? It was just a kind of set up with a stick and a net, when they went in the poor things it collapsed and they got the starlings. And they cooked limpets and whelks and all that. So that was always sort of a by word when we thought mam was being a bit mean ... and she says I never had to eat whelks like Granny did.<sup>35</sup>

Mary Ellen's authority to speak is derived from her family history and her interest in Shetland women of the past, bolstered by researched references to authenticating 'official' sources and legitimised by the Shetland myth of the strong, independent woman. These are stories which serve to fix in the memory of the listener an image of the autonomous or independent Shetland woman of the past, and they mirror the well-established discourses on Shetland womanhood. However, at the same time these stories serve to legitimise the position of the narrator and of Shetland women in general. For Mary Ellen Odie, social memory is a process of recovering and communicating the past, but at the same time validating this version of the past as a corrective to outsiders' image of Shetland as a masculine place and to general narratives of women's history which emphasise women's vulnerability to patriarchy and oppression.

To a very great extent the history of women in Shetland is now taken broadly as the history of Shetland. This only revealed itself to me from a close engagement with the women whose lives were under investigation. The women who spoke to me and to whom I listened on tapes in the archive, narrated stories conjoined by a common understanding of women's agency in an island community where any one overarching interpretation – be it separate spheres ideology, modernisation or emancipation – did not make sense. Their stories did not fit the familiar interpretations of women's lives in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. Although the historian might identify the existence of patriarchal structures and discourses, these women did not imagine themselves constrained by them. The same point is made by Sally Cole in her study of women in a Portuguese fishing community. 'Life histories both allow and require us to hear women themselves interpret their experiences and construct their identities ...[and] remind us that ... women's interpretation and subjective expression of those experiences may not be easily accommodated by – may, indeed, contradict – macro or general theories that seek to explain gender relations and women's role in society'.<sup>36</sup>

### **Issues of scale**

Prioritising women's own understanding of their past forces one to think hard about the organising concepts with which we have become familiar and acculturated. One advantage of a micro-study is the ability to illuminate the close-up, the minutiae of the everyday which may in turn offer a fresh perspective on the bigger picture. Problems arise though when the insights of the micro-study are too inconvenient or strange for incorporation into the general. Stanley's notion of 'competing histories' goes some way to dealing with the tension between the local or particular and the general or seamless narrative but it does not resolve the issue of how to weave these two approaches together. It is simply not the case that an accumulation of case studies that present alternative or subversive stories of gender relations will ultimately force a shift in dominant narratives.

Back in 1999 in a special issue of *Gender & History* on 'Retrospect and Prospect', Selma Leydesdorff ruminated on the possibility of oral histories to transcend the particularity of the local context. Oral histories, she argued, had been rooted in micro-

histories and although these were valuable there needed to be a move to make oral history a 'scholarly and activist' enterprise with transcultural implications. She went on to say that she was 'convinced that the strength of life stories lies in their ability to help us analyse a kaleidoscope of cultural representations'.<sup>38</sup> Such an approach is reminiscent of folktale and storytelling analysis which identifies common themes that transcend cultures, and hints at universal aspects of the human experience. Oral history, because of its base in the local or micro-context, has the potential both to change knowledge and to empower the community from whence it emanates. Yet it is not clear whether, in the context of women's and gender history, it has succeeded in transcending the particular.

The key to progress here is to focus on the methodology rather than the content. Personal narratives from Shetland women are stories grounded in everyday experience. Their specificity in the local is a strength, not a weakness, for it is from the power of the personal detail that one gains a sense of female experience in this place. The testimony of Agnes Leask, a crofter on the Shetland mainland, typifies a style of personal narrative that combines autobiography with a commentary on the Shetland way of life. The details of her life experience are a testament to the centrality of women to the crofting lifestyle in the islands as this description of her own economic role in the 1950s and 60s illustrates:

And at that time there was practically no work in Shetland at all and Davy [her husband] sort of did odd jobs with his tractor for folks roundabout, neighbours roundabout. It wasn't a great deal of money coming in but we sort of scraped by and then of course there was a farm at the end of the road there, and there was a bigger farm further up the valley and they were always looking for casual labour, so in amongst weeding me own tatties I'd go there whenever they needed casual labour – cabbages, tatties, single turnips, or working the peats because they used to hire in gangs of women to do the peat work. And it all helped to tide us over. When nothing else was available mother and I would go and gather winkles ... and then in the evenings in the wintertime I'd do hand-knitting ... I bought the knitting machine and once I got the knitting machine, got orders, firms were giving out orders because it was sort of cottage industry then. Then we were more

or less financially secure, as long as I could churn out about a dozen jumpers in the week. That would put our bread on the table for the week, and then of course we had our own vegetables, our own lamb and mutton ...<sup>39</sup>

Women in Shetland of recent decades do not doubt that they have been a very large part of the story of the islands. As Cole argues in her historical anthropology of Portuguese women in not dissimilar circumstances, these testimonies portray women with a 'sense of having a life'.<sup>40</sup> Indeed they do not shirk from placing themselves in the very heart of that history and as an historian one must honour that confidence and that sense of importance to the main story. Indeed, the well over 100 local women who participated in a conference on Shetland women in Shetland in 2007 demonstrates the vibrancy of historical engagement amongst women today with their own past.<sup>41</sup> Here is recognition that women's stories are valid and central to the shaping of local historical narratives.

The local context provides a fresh perspective, not just on the history of women and gender relations in Shetland but more generally. Shetland is a place which has produced its own narratives of continuity and change. Here, a story of female subordination within a wider discourse of patriarchy does not make sense. The ideology of domesticity certainly had very little relevance for the vast majority of the population and the notion of public and private spheres also fails to work as an analytical framework for understanding women's experience (although of course as a discourse it was present in all sorts of arenas). And thus these interpretive frameworks are rarely referred to in Shetland women's narratives. Women's voices expressed in printed and oral sources locally privilege a female-centred story that has its own sense of periodisation grounded in the material conditions of life in these islands. Their stories refer to change marked by the impact of environmental factors such as the weather or the presence or absence of herring in the seas and by the impact of external shocks: the two world wars, the arrival of the oil industry, the introduction of electricity. But transcending these global changes was the story of women as self-possessed and able to work with potentially transformative economic and social change. That is not to say that there were not

gender inequalities in Shetland. Rather, the story of inequality and difference is not the framework chosen by women in Shetland to interpret their own past. They acknowledge that life for many women in the islands' past was extraordinarily hard, but the lesson drawn from their experiences is one about empowerment and agency.

One might conclude that the gender relations here suggest this was a unique, even quirky place that offers a particular experience on the periphery of the European model. Maybe it suggests an alternative way of writing women's history but not a subversive way. After all, this was a small and rather unusual place. But equally one might suggest that the transmission of memory by Shetland women offers a route into one of those contiguous, competing narratives that will strengthen and deepen the writing of women's and gender history.

## **Conclusions**

The issue raised here concerns not merely the challenging of dominant frameworks of understanding or narratives of change but rather it is about the way we do our history. It concerns the links we make (or fail to make) between the present and the past, the voices we hear as we sit in the archive, the voices we privilege in our stories, and the theoretical frameworks we utilise. The story I told of women in Shetland was of the creation and survival of a female culture from the pre-modern era through to the twentieth century based on female networks, female knowledge and female power which stands separate from or parallel to the conventional story of female empowerment through political change and which does not conform neatly to the conventional periodisations and turning points.

What happened during the course of writing my book was a shift in my thinking about how to represent women's lives in the past. Adopting a perspective far removed geographically from the metropolitan heart of Europe and yet still very much a part of Europe, forces one to think differently about the prime motors of change and the chronology of that change. It became clear that Shetland women harboured a story that may well have a wider resonance in European consciousness – a story of female agency.

And I found it was a story only accessed by listening to women's voices of the present and the past. The woman's world exposed by Shetland women reveals to the feminist scholar a different way of viewing the world and women's place within it. And this might allow us to view the overarching frameworks with their periodisations and assumptions with a critical eye.

What my work in Shetland has taught me above anything else is that it is impossible to separate the past from the present because the past is constantly reified and reconstituted in the present. In Shetland, the past is not somewhere else or something forgotten, but a vibrant, living and remembered place which is constantly evoked in local culture in order to make sense of the present. And women have a prominent place in both time-scapes. This is recalled in Shetland culture as a metanarrative of women's agency vested in knowledge, economic activity and household survival. This was a *woman's world* that operated with very distinctive female rules, stories and understandings.

The juxtaposition of the micro and the macro raises some interesting dilemmas for the feminist historian who wishes to be able to tell the big story. In the process of deepening our research base and engaging in research strategies that privilege women's voices we are creating a patchwork of contiguous and sometimes competing histories which may be resistant to overarching narratives of continuity and change. The turning points, periodisations and conceptual frameworks which may work for broad-ranging syntheses have limited applicability when one takes a microscope to a place exhibiting different tendencies. Shetland might on the surface appear to present a picture of timelessness or continuity in women's lives on account of its relatively undeveloped or unmodernised economy until the late twentieth century, offering a corrective to generalised accounts which are constrained by global patterns of industrialisation, democratisation and so on. But close analysis reveals change of a different order and a different clock. For storyteller Mary Manson change was indicated by improvements in the health service on the islands; for Agnes Leask it was marked by the coming of the knitting machine. For many other women on Shetland change was contingent upon the oil

industry's appearance in Shetland in the 1970s which offered employment and new opportunities for economic independence.

Historians of women subscribing to 'universal narratives' need to avoid muting the voices of the very women we wish to hear. What might be called identity history is important to women's historians, and for me it would not have made sense to have written a history of women in Shetland that did not make sense to those women. Their history should not be subsumed within a universal European women's history narrative, because it would disappear or at the very least exist as an interesting exoticism; and that is not good enough. Weaving histories like this one (and the many other local or particular studies) into the smooth fabric of the narrative of European women's history creates more than colour and texture. It offers new and perhaps surprising points of contrast, it encourages us to look closer at the familiar stories, it disrupts narratives of continuity and change and chronologies and offers unfamiliar parallels. The experience of women in the Shetland Islands is not so unfamiliar to us; it can be found in other marginal economies, coastal communities and in other societies where men are absent.<sup>42</sup> The articulation of that experience in terms of the value placed on women's own interpretation of the past through the voices and memories of women is more unusual but it does help us negotiate our way through the apparent disjuncture between the overarching interpretative frameworks and the subjectivity of women's life stories. There is another story to tell; one that emerges from an historical practice which privileges a social memory crafted around narratives of women whose sense of the past included themselves.

## Notes

The author would like to thank Deborah Simonton and Perry Willson for their critical engagement with the issues raised in this article.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Nash, 'Rethinking Narratives in European Women's History: Motherhood, Identities and Female Agency in Twentieth-Century Spain', in T. Brotherstone, D. Simonton and O. Walsh (eds), *Gendering Scottish History: an International Approach* (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1999), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Canning, *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class and Citizenship* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> A point made by D. Simonton in 'Writing Women into Modern Europe', in D. Simonton (ed.), *The Routledge History of Women in Europe since 1700* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> These include Rachel G. Fuchs and Victoria E. Thompson, *Women in Nineteenth Century Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Gisela Bock, *Women in European History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Bonnie G. Smith, *Changing Lives: Women in European History Since 1700* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, George Duby and Michelle Perrot (eds), *History of Women in the West*, 5 vols (London: Belknap Press, 1992-4) and the six-volume Longman History of European Women series.

<sup>6</sup> A point made by Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert in the second edition of *Connecting Spheres* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) where they acknowledge that the earlier sense of a 'shared woman's experience' concealed a more 'diverse and conflictual reality', p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Canning, *Gender History in Practice*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>8</sup> Lynn Abrams, *The Making of Modern Woman: Europe 1789-1918* (London: Longman, 2002); Lynn Abrams, *Myth and Materiality in a Woman's World: Shetland 1800-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> There are too many works to mention here but examples of studies which challenge so-called 'national' histories include: Lynn Abrams, Eleanor Gordon, Deborah Simonton



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and Eileen Janes Yeo (eds), *Gender in Scottish History Since 1700* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2005); Siân Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (Routledge: London, 1996); Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain 1640–1990* (Routledge: London, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Notably Amanda J. Vickery, 'From Golden Age to Separate Spheres: a Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *Historical Journal* 36:2 (1993), pp. 383–414; Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, *Public Lives: Women, Family and Society in Victorian Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Simonton (ed.), *The Routledge History of Women in Europe since 1700* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 8–9. The staying-power of this organising concept is exhibited in the chapters contained in Simonton's edited volume. See also Perry Willson (ed.), *Gender, Family and Sexuality: the Private Sphere in Italy, 1860–1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Kathryn Gleadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 189.

<sup>13</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London: Routledge, 2002) and the subsequent debate led by Vickery, 'Golden Age', and taken up by early modern historians, for instance, Pamela Sharpe, 'Continuity and Change: Women's History and Economic History in Britain', *Economic History Review* 48 (1995), pp. 353–69.

<sup>14</sup> Nash, 'Rethinking Narratives', p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> Nash, 'Rethinking Narratives', p. 113.

<sup>16</sup> Liz Stanley, 'Rescuing "Women" in History from Feminist Deconstructionism', *Women's Studies International Forum* 13 (1990), pp. 151–7, here p.154.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Mary S. Hartmann, *The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Kathleen Canning and Sonya O. Rose, 'Gender, Citizenship and Subjectivity: Some Historical and Theoretical Considerations', *Gender & History* 13 (2001), pp. 427–43. For a comprehensive survey of these new perspectives see Canning, *Gender History in Practice*, chapter 1.

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<sup>18</sup> For the notion of symbolic referents, see Anthony P. Cohen, *Whalsay: Symbol, Segment and Boundary in a Shetland Island Community* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 115–16.

<sup>19</sup> Shetland Archive is one of only two in Scotland (Orkney is the other) which contains devolved papers from the National Archives of Scotland.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of this process see Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p.15 and Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History* 1 (2004), pp. 65–93.

<sup>21</sup> See Anna Green, 'Individual Remembering and "Collective Memory": Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates', *Oral History* 32 (2004), pp. 35–44; Michael Roper, 'Slipping out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History', *History Workshop Journal* 59 (2005), pp. 57–72.

<sup>22</sup> Shetland Archive (hereafter SA): **D 1/135, Scrapbook, cutting from *The Scotsman*, 2 Sept. 1903.**

<sup>23</sup> The stories of May Moar and Grace Petrie, for example, both of whom received official recognition for their acts of heroism at sea are immortalised in publications and in museum exhibits. See Abrams, *Myth and Materiality*, pp. 28–9.

<sup>24</sup> 'Jessie Saxby' in E. Ewan, S. Innes, S. Reynolds and R. Pipes (eds), *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 312–13; *The Rugged Island: A Shetland Lyric* (1934), directed by Jenny Brown (Scottish Film and Television Archive); Christina Jamieson, 'The Women of Shetland', *The New Shetlander* 177: Hairst (1991), pp. 31–3; 'Christina Jamieson' in *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, pp. 182–3.

<sup>25</sup> Cohen, *Whalsay*, p. 173.

<sup>26</sup> M. E. Renwanz, 'From Crofters to Shetlanders: the Social History of a Shetland Island Community's Self Image, 1872–1978', PhD, Stanford University, 1980, p. 291.

<sup>27</sup> Hazel Hughson, 'Ethel and Jeanie: Twentieth Century Knitters', unpublished paper, Shetland 2007; Lynn Abrams, 'Knitting, Autonomy and Identity: The Role of Hand-Knitting in the Construction of Women's Sense of Self in an Island Community, Shetland

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c.1850 to 2000', *Textile History* 37 (2006) pp. 149–65; A. Douglas (ed.), *How Might We Revalue Traditional Ways of Making? A Research Project Revaluing Shetland Knitting – The Maakin Lab* (CD Rom, Aberdeen: The Robert Gordon University in collaboration with Performing Arts Laboratories, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Shetland Archive (hereafter SA) 3 (Oral History Interviews): 1/123, John Gear.

<sup>29</sup> 'Mary Manson' in Ewan et al. (eds), *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, p. 248. Mary was born in 1897.

<sup>30</sup> For a more extensive discussion of this narrative, see Abrams, *Myth and Materiality*, pp. 39–44, 201–2.

<sup>31</sup> SA: 3/1/77/2 (Mary Manson, interviewed in 1982).

<sup>32</sup> See Janet L. Nelson, 'Gender, Memory and Social Power', *Gender & History* 12 (2000), pp. 722–34, here pp. 723–4.

<sup>33</sup> SA: 3/1/77/2.

<sup>34</sup> SA: 3/1/1396, Interview with Mary Ellen Odie, conducted by the author, 2001.

<sup>35</sup> SA: 3/1/1396.

<sup>36</sup> Sally Cole, *Women of the Praia: Work and Lives in a Portuguese Coastal Community* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> Selma Leydesdorff, 'Gender and the Categories of Experienced History', *Gender & History* 11 (1999), pp. 597–611, at p. 599 and 604.

<sup>39</sup> SA: 3/1/1395, Interview with Agnes Leask, conducted by the author, 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Cole, *Women of the Praia*, p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> The conference was 'A Woman's Island? Women in Shetland, Past, Present and Future', Shetland Museum and Archives, 20–22 April 2007.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, C. Brettell, *Men who Migrate, Women who Wait: Population and History in a Portuguese Parish* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Allyson M. Poska, *Women and Authority in Early Modern Spain: the Peasants of Galicia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); M.-L. Rey-Henningsen, *The World of the Ploughwoman: Folklore and Reality in Matriarchal Northwest Spain* (Helsinki: Acedemia Scientiarum Fennica, 1994).